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Flexible Studies of English

A Case Study of Students' and Teachers' Perceptions of

Flexible Learning in Adult Education

Flexibla engelskstudier

En fallstudie av studerandes och lärares uppfattningar om
flexibelt lärande inom vuxenutbildning

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Abstract

This dissertation is a case study of the English workshops at an adult education school. Our purpose is to provide an understanding of how students and teachers perceive flexible learning and how the study form relates to the steering documents and current theory on how languages are learned. The empirical study consists of observations and interviews with two teachers and five students. Our findings show that the students and teachers are generally content with the study form. Students specifically appreciate the opportunity to plan their own time, although it involves taking a great deal of responsibility. They do not miss the social aspects of having a class, but the teacher's attention is important. The teachers perceive the study form to be beneficial for some students and though they see a clash between facilitating interaction and individualization, they find the workshop to be a good complement to regular classroom courses.

Keywords: adult education, English, flexible learning, workshop

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1 Introduction

In this chapter we give a background to our study of flexible learning. We account for the origins of the study form and explain and define what flexible learning means. Finally, we present the purpose of our study and pose our research questions.

1.1 Background

Flexible courses are becoming increasingly popular in Swedish schools today. This development has its roots in the high demands on education in today's society. Flexible courses provide the opportunity for people to combine studies with jobs as well as other commitments, allowing for life-long learning. Flexible learning means that students do most of their work independently instead of having regular lessons. This way of working entails new and interesting challenges for students and teachers, such as high levels of independence and responsibility for students, and largely a different way for teachers to structure their work.

Because of the novelty of this study form, we believe that it is an interesting field to look into. The location of our research is one of the adult education schools in Skåne. This school offers its students flexible courses in a wide range of subjects, English being one of them. A concern of the teachers at this school of adult education is that many students do not complete the flexible courses. The teachers have therefore expressed the need for having the flexible study form properly evaluated. This gave us the incentive to conduct a case study which sets out to shed some light on student and teacher perceptions of working with flexible learning and it may well be of interest to the teachers concerned, as well as to others. Since this way of teaching is becoming ever more widespread we are likely to come across it, or even teach flexible courses ourselves in the future.

1.2 The origins of flexible learning

We want to put flexible learning into a larger perspective and therefore present a historical and social context as a background and explanation to the development of flexible learning in adult education. This background information shows that flexible learning is not truly a new concept. Although educational policies and technological aids have changed, the basic idea of reaching more people remains and has deep-set roots, not least in Sweden.

Flexible learning is closely linked to distance education. The history of this form of education thus starts about 150 years ago, when the first correspondence school was launched in Bath in Great Britain (SOU 1998:83 p 11). As is still the case today with flexible learning, correspondence schools allowed people to study while at the same time working, which is why these schools became increasingly common and spread around the world. In Sweden, Hans Svensson Hermod started a correspondence school in Malmoe in 1898. He was a regular teacher who started supporting his students by giving them instructions per mail. This became important for those who moved to places where no equivalent education was available. The Hermod Institute aimed at reaching as many people as possible, and was successful in doing so, considering the fact that in the 1960s more than 100 000 applied for their courses every year[1] (p 12).

A parallel development was that of schools for adults providing the education necessary to get into higher education, which led to the end of the correspondence schools in the 1960s. In the 1930s unemployment was high and vocational schools offered part-time courses but these gave no admission to higher education. In the years after the Second World War Sweden was expanding its welfare and there was a need for highly educated people as well as more educated people to work in the growing industries. A report aiming at helping adults get access to higher education gave rise to evening schools being started by the adult education associations and others, the first one in 1953 (Johansson and Salin 2004 pp 114-115). Two state schools for adults were started in Norrköping (SSVN) and Härnösand (SSVH), in 1956 and 1962 respectively. An official investigation in 1959 set out to improve social conditions for adults.[2] This was a question of

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[1] Hermods is an example of a *single mode* school, which are large scale specialised distance education schools. Sweden has since taken the path of *dual mode* schools that provide both traditional teaching and distance education within the same school (SOU 1998:83 pp 16-17).

[2] Olof Palme was a member of the investigation and had pursued this policy earlier in the SSU (Johansson and Salin 2004 p 116).

justice and equality. Those who due to social, financial, geographical or other reasons had not received a proper education when they were young were going to get a second chance. The evening schools, run with participant fees and later government funding, were no longer run by the adult education associations, but, starting in 1968, adult education was administered by local authorities. Because of a teacher shortage there was an attempt to replace teachers with TV and radio shows. However unsuccessful it shows an early attempt at distance education and the use of technology in adult education (Johansson and Salin 2004 pp 116-118). In 1969 we saw the birth of what today is known as life-long learning. Olof Palme, who was then Minister of Education, introduced the term "education permanente."[3] The term translates into "recurrent education" and shows the internationally acknowledged realization that we need education throughout our lives to meet the changing needs of society (Holmberg and Carlsson 2004 p 12). Life-long learning is a concept that has stayed with us and has grown more important ever since.

In the early 1990s Sweden was again in a slump with high rates of unemployment and financial decline. Economy measures ensued with a joint curriculum[4] for the upper-secondary level, Lpf 94, and investigations exploring the need for promoting competition and the use of distance education as a result. The main outcome was the Knowledge Boost, Kunskapslyftet, which had as a principal purpose to take unemployment down by half, but also to contribute to the progress of adult education (Johansson and Salin 2004 pp 124-125). This is when the term flexible learning came into play. The shift towards a more knowledge-intense society and belief in life-long learning meant that there was a need for study forms that enabled more people to study. The rapid development of information technology combined with the Swedish fondness for distance education gave us "media-supported distance education" and the term "e-learning" in the mid 90s. However, soon after, the Distance Education Committee launched "flexible education" as a term for the combination of classroom and distance education with technical media being used as a facilitator instead of being a goal in itself (Andersson 2004 pp 83-84). The term "flexible learning" which is used today probably has to do with the term "open and flexible learning" used internationally and also indicates a focus on the learner rather than on the form of education being used. In 2000, the European prime ministers met in

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[3] In a speech at a meeting for Ministers of Education in Versailles in 1969 (Holmberg and Carlsson 2004 p 12).
[4] Adult education had had its own curriculum since 1982, the Lvux 82 (Johansson and Salin 2004 p 121).

Lisbon to declare a strategy for the progress of Europe, stating that by 2010 "the European Union is to be the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy of the world […]" (Holmberg and Carlsson 2004 p 8). Hans-Inge Persson, the director-general of the National Center for Flexible Learning (CFL), the public authority promoting flexible learning, believes in flexible learning as a means to meet the expectations of The Lisbon Declaration (p 9).

1.3 What is flexible learning?

There are several ways to explain what flexible learning means. Some give a definition of the concept and others describe the factors involved in it. To begin with, Andersson describes the concept to be a combination of different adaptation possibilities rather than a single method. He finds the areas in need of flexibility for the student to be place, time, content, form and method, and study environment. These needs then imply activities of the education administrator, which concern the pedagogy, organization, economy and technology (2004 pp 84-85, 88). The same basic components are found in a pamphlet by the CFL, where flexible learning is described as

> […] a study form that puts the focus on the individual and where great consideration is taken to the special requirements and conditions of the individual students. The student has the opportunity to choose the time, place, pace and form of the studies. Flexible learning implies that the education administrators modify and improve their pedagogy, organization and technology to meet the needs of the students. (*Nytt lärande. Nya former* p 3)

A shorter explanation, focusing on the learner, is found in The Australian Flexible Learning Framework's definition: "Flexible learning, which includes e-learning, is about the learner deciding what, where, when, and how they learn."[5] This definition includes "e-learning," which is one among many terms for distance education, where electronic means, usually the Internet, is the deliverer of learning. This brings us to look at the relationship between flexible learning and distance education. According to Holmberg, Keegan's definition of distance education has a pedagogical aspect to it that can be applied on flexible learning (2004 p 74):

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[5] www.flexiblelearning.net.au/aboutus/

Distance education is a form of education characterised by

- the quasi-permanent separation of teacher and learner throughout the length of the learning process (this distinguishes it from conventional face-to-face education)
- the influence of an educational organisation both in the planning and preparation of learning materials and in the provision of student support services (this distinguishes it from private study and teach-yourself programmes)
- the use of technical media – print, audio, video or computer – to unite teacher and learner and carry the content of the course
- the provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue (this distinguishes it from other uses of technology in education)
- the quasi-permanent absence of the learning group throughout the length of the learning process so that people are usually taught as individuals and not in groups, with the possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialisation purposes.   (Keegan 1990 in Holmberg 2004 p 77)

Holmberg also relates flexible learning to "open learning," which means that education is open to everybody (2004 p 75). He finds that this adds a political aspect to flexible learning which also links it to the concept of life-long learning.

Kjellin, Perme and Skärgren include distance education, among other forms, as part of flexible learning. They have worked with flexible learning in one adult education center. They describe flexible learning as a way of organizing education with the objectives of the steering documents and the needs and special requirements of individual students as the starting point. Another form of flexible learning they describe is what they call "semi-distance studies," which means that students come to school for certain activities and have individual study plans. The basic idea is to offer direct or indirect (via e-mail) tutoring in groups or individually (2004 p 24, 11, 32). This is the form that best fits into the organization of studies in our investigation.

Though we will describe the study form at the school of adult education that we have studied in more detail later on, we present it briefly here. In the school of adult education course catalogue, flexible learning is described as a way of learning that is different from regular classroom teaching, allowing the student more freedom to choose when and where to do their work. There are new admissions every month and the length of time it takes to finish varies and is decided largely by the student. Distance education is one form of flexible learning at the school. However, we have studied the *English workshop* form. In the workshop students and teachers meet once a week; the individual students are given several time slots to choose from. The students are not obliged to come every week, but if they stay away for too long the teacher will contact them and as a last resort write them off the course. The rest of the time the students plan

themselves, aided mostly by a written study guide. Computers are used as a tool to assist learning and as a means of making contact via e-mail, but are not used to distribute teaching materials.

1.4 Purpose and research questions

Though extensive research on flexible learning, particularly on distance education, has been done over the years, we have not come across any studies focusing specifically on flexible second language learning from a learner perspective. Since we are convinced that language learning differs from the learning of other more criteria-based subjects we believe an investigation of student and teacher perceptions of flexible learning in relation to second language learning is called for. Hence, the purpose of our study is to provide an understanding of how students and teachers perceive flexible learning and how the study form relates to the steering documents and current theory on how languages are learned. The study is conducted at a school of adult education and is limited to the workshop courses of English. To reach our objective we pose the following research questions:

- How do the students perceive flexible learning with regards to their study of English?
- How do the teachers perceive flexible learning with regards to students' study and learning of English?

Though it would also be interesting to investigate why some students do not complete the courses, we feel it is even more relevant to capture the perceptions of the students currently taking these courses. There is a high drop-out rate in adult education in general, and it can therefore not be said to be characteristic for flexible courses in particular.

2 Theoretical framework

Since our objective is to understand flexible education with regard to learning English, the first part of this chapter deals with theoretical aspects of learning a second language. We account for the view on language learning reflected in the syllabus for English and present some theorists who continue to influence contemporary teaching practices and steering documents. In the second part of the chapter we therefore highlight concepts like *communication* and *interaction* and use previous research to relate them to flexible learning. Concepts often associated with flexible learning are *individualization*, *differentiation*, *validation* and *learner autonomy*, which we explain and relate to research in the third part.

2.1 Second language learning

There are many ways of explaining how languages are learned. Over the years different theories have been dominant and have affected language teaching fundamentally. In recent years, two approaches to language learning have been prominent, namely the cognitive constructivist approach and the sociocultural approach.

The curriculum points to the importance of communication, stating that the school should develop students' communicative and social competence (Lpf 94 p 39). The view of language learning reflected in the syllabus for English 2000 also has a clear focus on communication and communicative competence. It is also stated in the syllabus that students need to use strategies to solve various language problems, an idea which reflects Piaget's cognitive theory (Malmberg 2001 pp 22-23, 18). Piaget has clearly influenced teaching over the years and today represents a constructivist approach to learning, arguing that knowledge is constructed by the individual (Egidius 1999 pp 94-103). Learning, according to Piaget, is an inner, cognitive process which follows the learner's development steps (Dysthe 1996 pp 49-54). Piaget also argues the importance of the learner reflecting, self-regulating and being active in the learning process (Säljö 2000 pp 58-59).

Vygotsky represents a somewhat different approach, arguing that the cognitive development and learning is completely dependent upon social interaction. In other words Vygotsky, who adheres to the sociocultural tradition, claims that learning takes place in interplay with others and he thereby emphasizes social interaction, while Piaget focuses more on the individual learner (Egidius 1999 pp 94-103, 83).

Though there are differences between Piaget's and Vygotsky's views on learning there are also similarities. One such similarity is Piaget's idea that the learner needs to be active and not just passively exposed to information and language, which is similar to sociocultural theory. However, there is a clear difference in the cognitive and sociocultural perception of what communication is. While Piaget and the cognitivists see communication as an exchange *between* people, Vygotsky sees communication as both a process *between* people but also as an ongoing process *within* the individual. Vygotsky thereby sees thought as internalized speech (Lightbown and Spada 1999 p 23). Interaction, which is closely related to communication, can be understood as social interplay (Dysthe 1996 p 47).

In *Det flerstämmiga klassrummet* Dysthe writes that current ideas on learning often include both the cognitive and the sociocultural approach to learning. Her focus is on the social aspects of learning, though she does not discard the cognitive process of learning (1996 p 49).

2.2 Communication and interaction in flexible learning

Since flexible courses are organized quite differently from classroom courses, it is interesting to see how the focus on communication and interaction of the syllabus for English is reflected in flexible courses.

In flexible learning communication takes on new forms, often in distance education the Internet is the dominant means for communicating by sending e-mails and often some kind of discussion and information platform online is used. However, at the school of our study the students meet the teacher every week and so face-to-face communication takes place.

Thelin and Scherp argue that the flexible study form makes it more difficult to facilitate interaction and cooperation, referring to the fact that a wide range of

options regarding when and where to study, results in problems with finding opportunities to meet to discuss and interact (2004 p 25). A similar concern is raised by Gabrielsson who promotes the social objectives of the curriculum and the values of cooperation and solidarity for the individual, but also for society as a whole. He argues that there is a lack of communication between students in flexible education and also a lack of social interaction, which he claims has devastating consequences for the weaker students in particular, while successful learners can perform well regardless of study form (2004 p 34).

A contrasting view is voiced by Eriksson who claims that "distance means closeness" (2004 p 38). In her experience with teaching math in a flexible form, with some real meetings, there is a strong sense of belonging and good group dynamics in her distance groups. She also believes that they interact when they meet (2004 pp 38-39).

Svedjeholm discusses interaction versus flexibility in her article "Mötets roll i distanslärandet." She says that the main objection to the increase of distance education today is that the physical meeting is viewed as a prerequisite for learning. Hence distance education cannot provide a sufficient learning environment (2004 p 1). This suggests that there is a discrepancy between flexible learning and sociocultural theory, since flexible learning often entails fewer opportunities to meet and interact. Although the interactionist view of learning is widespread, there is not a consensus. Some argue that interaction really is not that important to learning. In her research Svedjeholm finds that adult learners value the flexibility of being able to choose when and where to study more than interaction and collaboration. In addition, she argues that a good dialogue between teacher and student in distance education can make up for some of the lost interaction (2004 p 12).

Östlund found in her case study of how distance education students experience their studies that interaction indeed was important to them. They felt that having peers has a positive effect on motivation, self-confidence and over-all satisfaction. Östlund thereby found interaction to be valuable to support the learning process (2005).

2.3 Focus on the individual learner

In recent years second language learning has undergone significant changes. One fundamental change is the shift from a teacher focus to a learner focus (Yule 1996 p 194). The focus on the individual learner entails several aspects of teaching and learning and therefore we account for concepts closely related to flexible learning and learner focus, namely individualization, differentiation, validation and learner autonomy, below.

As accounted for in the previous chapter, the student is the starting point in flexible education and thus teaching is supposed to be adjusted to suit the needs of the individual student. This corresponds to the curriculum which states that education should be adjusted to meet students' needs (Lpf 94 p 38).

Individualization is a concept often used in pedagogy today and involves various adjustments to accommodate the needs of the individual. The pedagogical needs include adjustments to learners' different experiences and ways in which they think and process input. According to *Pedagogisk uppslagsbok*, the concept is a complex abstraction to describe the outcome of the relationship between what is taught and the students' interpretation and processing of that information. Teaching is individualized when there are good reasons to believe that the student experiences a meaningful learning situation (1996 pp 271-272). Individualization is, however, often used in a broader sense, not only concerning learning but also including accommodating more practical needs, such as where and when to study (Thelin and Scherp 2004 p 26). In addition it entails adjusting the pace of the studies to the individual (Hallengren 2004 p 303). Regarding pace and other time factors, Olsson found in her thesis, concerning media-supported learning in an upper-secondary school, that one group of students felt that it was positive to be able to choose their working hours and spend all the time necessary on a task (2005 p 71). She believes this means that the education is somewhat individualized.

Furthermore, the curriculum states that the individual school should strive towards flexible solutions concerning organization, courses to offer and ways of working (Lpf 94 p 40). The whole idea of flexible education is to meet the needs of the individual learner, which then allows people to study while for example still working or raising children, making adult education more accessible to new groups of adults (SOU 1998:84 p 27). Thelin and Scherp question, however, what

needs are truly accommodated by flexible learning (2004 pp 26-27). They raise the concern that the flexible study form in practice does not facilitate the sought-after individualization since the flexibility and adjustments mainly concern practical aspects rather than pedagogical learner needs with regard to the individual's prior experience.

This critique resembles the one Gabrielsson voices in his article "Flexibelt lärande och läroplansmål" where he points out the danger of rationalizing education and removing the role of collaboration and group dynamics. He stresses the fact that flexible learning makes it more difficult to reach the social objectives of the curriculum (2004 p 33).

Individualization is also linked to differentiation, a concept that like individualization has many definitions. In the general sense differentiation involves the process of teaching being adjusted to suit students' needs, abilities and learner styles. To differentiate, the teacher needs to find out where each student is at and where they have the potential to be in order to provide material and apply teaching methods that are challenging enough yet give students the opportunity to feel that they can accomplish something. Supporting the students in their learning process in this way of scaffolding is closely related to Vygotsky's theories concerning the zone of proximal development (Bartlett, Burton and Peim 2001 pp 161-163).

Another aspect of meeting the individual's needs is to acknowledge what they already know and move on from there. The term used for this is validation and often validation is a way of granting students, who perhaps have practical experience but lack sufficient formal education, access to specific education. However, it could also be as simple as the teacher assessing the student's performance and using that as a starting point for that individual's course plan, rather than using the same for all (Andersson 2004 pp 91-99).

Flexible study forms require a lot of responsibility on the part of the learner. Tornberg defines learner autonomy as an approach to learning which entails learners taking on the responsibility for their own learning (2000 p 165). Part of this responsibility concerns the objectives and content of the learning and part of it concerns the steps you have to take to get there. The concept was introduced by the European Council[6] and the intention was that Europe, in addition to having

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[6]   Henri Holic, who worked for the language program within the European Council, introduced the term. This is why learner autonomy is mostly associated with language learning and teaching (Tornberg 2000 p 70).

citizens that are good at languages, needs individuals who are independent and think for themselves in order to strengthen democracy (Tornberg 2000 pp 70-71). In addition, the syllabus for English states that one of the goals to aim for is to make pupils "take increasing responsibility for developing their language ability."[7] Since flexible education demands a great deal of students regarding responsibility, maturity and discipline, it is more suitable for adults than young learners (SOU 1998:84 p 150).

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[7] www.skolverket.se

3 Research methodology

In the following chapter we present the methods used in our empirical study. We also briefly describe our interviewees, the school and workshops in order to contextualize our study.

Our research takes the form of a case study of a single school of adult education in Scania and aims at investigating a particular case of flexible learning and how the people involved perceive this study form. Thus we seek to explore rather than prove something (Merriam 1994 p 9). As our objective is to gain an understanding of how individual students and teachers perceive the flexible study form with regards to students' study of English, qualitative research as opposed to quantitative is the natural choice (Merriam 1994 p 61). One way of describing what qualitative research entails is what Hatch refers to as participant perspectives. He writes that "[q]ualitative research seeks to understand the world from the perspectives of those living in it" (2002 p 7).

Moreover, we adapt a constructivist position which like the qualitative approach presupposes that there is no objectivity in the sense that one cannot objectively observe human activity, thus researchers have to rely on subjective interpretations (Hatch 2002 p 9, 15).

3.1 Data collection

In order to carry out our case study, we used two different means of data collection, observations and interviews. Initially, to gain an understanding of the contextual details, we observed teachers and students in the workshops. These observations were in our view necessary to create an overview of how work is carried out in the workshops and to provide an understanding of the physical context.

The observations fall into the category of participant observations, where we did not attempt to act as flies on the wall, but rather as moderate/passive

participants (Hatch 2002 pp 72-73). We chose not to participate fully in order to attain an as accurate a picture of the workshop practice as possible. Hatch accounts for several advantages of using observations in qualitative research, for example that it permits a better contextual understanding (2002 p 72). Merriam emphasizes that one cannot observe everything but have to focus on particular aspects in line with the aim of the study. For us the focus was on the environment but also on what Merriam calls "activities and interplay," meaning that we observed what the individuals were doing and how they related to each other (1994 p 104). Though our main source of data were interviews, the observations were essential in order for us to describe the learning environment and to help us form our guiding questions. The observations also made it easier for us to relate to, and interpret, the data collected through interviewing.

As a second step we interviewed teachers as well as students taking the English flexible courses. This corresponded to our purpose and the questions posed; it also provided us with different perspectives on the subject matter. According to Hatch it seems imperative to use interviewing as a means of collecting data, when the study aims at capturing participant perspectives (2002 p 97). The interviews we conducted were elaborate, formal and in-depth to attain a good understanding of informants' perceptions. They were structured since they were led by us and were focused on our guiding questions, and at the same time semi-structured because we followed the directions of the interviewee (2002 p 94).

3.2 Sampling

Sampling is complicated, especially when interviews make up a major part of data collection (Hatch 2002 p 98). Since there were many possible informants among the students, we decided to use the teachers involved to direct us when it came to choosing informants, asking them to select students with different experiences who could provide us with a nuanced picture of the flexible study form. This way of using "experts" in the selection process has the advantage that the informants are not randomly picked but selected by people who know them (1994 p 63). We chose to interview five students. The students have varying experience of doing flexible courses and there is a variation in gender and age. It is important,

according to Johansson and Svedner, to choose informants with different experiences and background for the study to include the common and important perceptions (2004 p 41).

For teacher interviews, we used comprehensive sampling, which is an all-inclusive strategy (Merriam 1994 p 63). Since there are only two teachers teaching the flexible English courses at the particular school of adult education, this was natural since they are the only informants who can provide a teacher perspective on flexible learning of English in the specific context.

The amount of data collected is limited in order to make our study feasible within the given time constraint, however still sufficient to reach our objectives. Johansson and Svedner point out that it often is better to do few, elaborate qualitative interviews than many superficial ones (2004 p 41).

3.3 Procedures

In practice, the observations consisted of three sessions in the workshops where we observed by sitting quietly among the students. We set out to be passive participants to not disturb the students and teachers in their work. However, we ended up taking a slightly more active part, since both teachers involved us in discussions. What we were focusing on was, above all, to describe the physical setting and to find out how work was carried out. The data generated during the observations was documented by taking field notes (Hatch 2002 p 77). The two of us took separate notes, which were then interwoven to provide a fuller understanding presented in the following chapter.

Before the interviews, each of the interviewees selected were given a sheet of information describing the focus of the study, though it also concerned research ethics, assuring them of their anonymity (Appendix 1). The interviews were carried out in small rooms intended for group work, where the students could feel at ease and where they were not distracted. They were also offered a light snack to create a relaxed atmosphere. A tape recorder was used to document the data, allowing us to focus on the conversation rather than on taking notes.

Hatch recommends researchers to use guiding questions when interviewing and to ask probing questions and other questions that arise as the interview proceeds (2002 p 101). Thus we used guiding questions, one set for the students,

and another for the teachers though they are in many ways similar (Appendices 2 and 3).

Initially the students were asked to tell us about themselves and if they had prior experience with flexible courses. They were then asked to describe how they go about learning English in and outside the workshops and how they believe they learn English best. Then they were also asked how they felt this study form worked for them, and whether there was anything they would like to change in order to learn more. Finally, they were asked if they would recommend others to take flexible English courses.

The guiding questions for the teachers are along the same lines. They deal with background and experience as teachers and as teachers of flexible courses. They were then asked to describe how they work with the workshops and whether they believe it facilitates opportunities for individualization. They were then asked to explain how they believe the study form works for the students' learning and how they believe the students' perceive the flexible workshop courses. Lastly they were asked to consider whether their view on how languages are learned corresponds to this study form or if there are discrepancies. We also used warm-up and wind-down questions to make the interviews as natural conversations as possible.

Once the interviews were conducted the data collected was processed, read and reread in order to identify suitable categories for analysis. The categories were based on recurring themes in the interview data. The result was then accounted for and analyzed with references to relevant literature on flexible learning and second language learning theory.

3.4 Portraits of interviewees

These short presentations give a basic idea of who the five students and two teachers we interviewed are and what their prior experience with flexible study forms is. All names are fictional. We begin with the students and then describe the teachers.

Students

David is the only participant who studies English A. He started the course about a month into the regular term and at the time of the interview he had only been studying for about four weeks. The reason why David chose to study in the workshop is because he works three afternoons per week and only takes the one course and the flexible course allows him to finish in one semester instead of two. A year ago he started and quit the course because he was given more work at his work place. David graduated from upper-secondary school a couple of years ago. He failed English A which is why he is in adult education now.

Jenny studies English B and has no prior experience with workshop courses or adult education. She graduated from upper-secondary school two years ago. Jenny failed English B which is why she is at the school of adult education. She also takes Spanish. After graduating she has worked in a pet store and at a coffee shop. She was still working a lot at the coffee shop when she started English B which is why she chose the workshop course. Jenny wants to work with an animal-related profession in the future.

Susanne studies English B. She took English A as a regular classroom course and chose the workshop for the B course because she has a phobia for giving oral presentations. She has taken some other flexible courses as well. Susanne has a husband and two children and worked in a factory for fifteen years until she was laid off. She went to upper-secondary school for two years when she was young and she is now making up for the third year. She wants to become a recreation leader or recreation instructor.

Anna studies English B as well. She has not taken the A course at the school of adult education. Anna is an assistant nurse who works full-time and has two small children. About ten years after finishing upper-secondary school she realized that she wanted to become an economist and for that she needed Mathematics C. Without realizing how much extra work was involved she also thought that English B could be useful to take. Anna did not actually choose the workshop form for English but it was given to her in her letter of admissions.

Finally, *Carl* also studies the B course. He has previously taken English A in the workshop as well. Carl has also taken other subjects in flexible forms. He chose this study form because he lives in a small community outside the town and it gives him the opportunity to only have to come to school once a week, which keeps costs for bus fare down. Carl was drafted right after he finished upper-

secondary school a couple of years ago. After that he started at the adult education center because he had failed English and some other subjects. Carl quit one subject because he did not like the group and after six months he broke off his studies because he got a temporary job. Now he is back to complete the courses he did not finish.

Teachers

Eva is an experienced teacher who has been working at this particular school since 1991. The last few years she has been teaching the flexible courses English A and English B. She chose to teach the flexible courses since she enjoys trying new ways of working.

 Thomas, like Eva, is an experienced teacher who has worked at the school for 10 years and has taught the flexible English courses for about 4 years. He chose to become a teacher partly because he was not a very successful student and thinks that it gives him a somewhat different approach to his profession than teachers who never experienced any problems in school. He too chose to take on these courses and felt it was about time this alternative was offered at the school.

3.5 The school and the workshops

Our case study is located at a public school of adult education (Komvux) in Scania. It is a school which gives courses in a wide range of subjects while also giving full vocational programs in healthcare, medical secretarial studies and computerized accounting and which has a unit for students with special needs (Särvux). Swedish as a second language (SFI) is also given and immigrant students studying Swedish make up a major part of the school's students.

 The school addresses adults who want to complete their grades from secondary and upper-secondary school as well as adults who seek to raise their competence for their work, change jobs or seek to broaden their knowledge in general (see Course Catalogue).

 In line with other Swedish schools of adult education, they give courses in both regular and more flexible forms. The school gives regular day and night courses, distance (e-courses) but also flexible (workshop) courses in an increasing number of subjects. The flexible courses allow student to start their studies, not

just twice a year at the beginning of term, but continuously with some courses starting monthly. The school's 2004 Quality Report states that 33 upper-secondary workshop courses were given that year, an increase by 4 subjects since 2003. In 2004 about 1000 students took one or more flexible courses at the school. In a survey presented in the report the students taking the workshop courses were asked why they chose to study in the flexible form, a majority answered that they wanted to study at their own pace, though a significant part referred to the fact that the times offered in the regular courses did not suit them (p 6). The school also provides the possibility for students to take extensive tests in various subjects to attain a grade after studying a course on their own. Practical skills can also be validated, specifically in healthcare.

Flexible study forms are on the increase in adult education today, and thus the school of our choice is representative of schools of adult education in that regard.

The classrooms in which the workshops are held are slightly different from most regular classrooms and we therefore describe them. There are two separate workshop classrooms, Eva has one room and Thomas the other.

Eva's workshop is a normal-sized rectangular classroom that feels very open and light due to one wall consisting mainly of glass and another having several windows. Computers cover the larger part of two walls and an oval-shaped table that seats about 12 people is standing in the middle of the room. In the room there is also a whiteboard, a TV, an overhead and a cupboard with tests and extra materials in it.

Thomas's classroom is also a rectangular room that has windows along one wall. In one corner of the room a room divider creates a small separate space. A table with four computers on it is standing against one wall and next to it are three comfortable-looking small armchairs standing around a circular-shaped table. On the rest of the space ten desks are spread out, one facing the others. There is also a cabinet, bookshelves, and an overhead in the room.

4 Results and analysis

In this chapter we present the results of our data collection and analyze the results of the interviews with regard to the theoretical aspects and research presented in chapter 2. As we have seen in the previous chapter our data, in addition to the interviews we carried out with students and teachers, consists of observations of the workshops. We reflect on rather than analyze the observation data, giving our understanding and impressions of workshop practice.

4.1 Results of the observations

We observed workshops on three separate occasions. In our first and third session we observed some different groups in Eva's workshop. In between those two observations we also observed some groups in Thomas's workshop. This gave us an insight in the day-to-day work in the workshops.

On our *first observation*, of an English A group, three students and Eva were sitting scattered around the table. An additional student was already seated in another room, taking a test. One of the students at the table was also going to take a test and so was placed in another room. A student at the table was handed back marked written work which he looked through. The other student, concerned that she was not good enough to be at the upper-secondary level, initiated a discussion with the teacher who went through the students' strengths and weaknesses and advised her on what to do. They also discussed how to go about learning new words which the student felt she had difficulties with. Eva then paid attention to the other student, discussing his problems, and fetched him a grammar book. The student who was already taking a test when we arrived returned and continued to work on her own. Eva then contacted her and they discussed a text. Soon the one-hour class was over and the students left. The whole time the atmosphere in the workshop was very calm and the noise level was very low.

On our *second observation*, in an English B group, two students and Thomas were present. One student was received a marked task she had previously handed

in and her sources were discussed. Thomas then turned to the other student and handed back a test, commenting on the result. One more student entered and Thomas told her he had not marked her test yet but that they would look at it together later. He then checked with the students to see how far they had all come with their work and asked if they could do the test after the break that was coming up. They then discussed one of the texts from the textbook. The student who was there on time was then asked to do an oral presentation of the novel she had read. The presentation led to a discussion about the characters in the novel. The class ended with Thomas giving a run-through of the grammar that was going to be on the test they were going to take.

A short time later a student arrived. He studied English A and had asked to meet the teacher alone and thus was the only one present. Thomas sat down with him and checked what he had done and showed him what he needed to do. They decided that the student would take a test after the autumn break and then Thomas, at the student's request, went to look for some extra material to prepare him for the test. After about 20-30 minutes the session was over.

About ten minutes later another student, who was supposed to have been with the earlier group, arrived. He was handed back a test and they discussed his problems with spelling and grammar. Thomas pointed out that he had no problems with reading and understanding. They discussed some of the texts in the textbook and the student told Thomas what book he was going to read. The student also handed in reflections on a poem of his choice, which he was given very positive feedback on. He then asked if he could switch contact days whereby Thomas found a new time for him.

On our *third observation* we visited Eva's workshop again. One student came and was going to take a test. Eva found a test and seated the student in another room. No one else but another student teacher arrived the first hour, although more students were registered on that time slot.

The second hour two students arrived. Eva sat down talking to them, checking what they had done. Another student arrived and was going to give an oral presentation about an author. On one end of the table the student teacher went through a text with the two first students, discussing and translating certain parts, while Eva sat down next to the new arrival at the other end of the table to listen to her presentation.

4.2 Reflections on the observations

The observations provided us with an understanding of how work is carried out in the workshops and gave us a sense of the environment.

What initially struck us was the calm atmosphere. The groups of students present at the same time were very small, only about two to four students, who quietly awaited their turn to get the teacher's help and attention. There seemed to be plenty of one-on-one time for each student. The observations also showed us that the workshop practice involved a lot of teacher-student communication, though very little interaction between students took place. Finally, what was apparent to us was the unpredictability, from a teacher perspective, of what was going to happen that day, which students would show up (and how many!) and what they had done.

All in all, the observations were important for us both to form guiding questions though also to be able to more accurately interpret the student and teacher interviews that follow.

4.3 Results of student interviews

We divide the results of our student interviews with into two main categories, which follow the structure of the guiding questions. The first one is the *student views on language learning* and the other is the *student perceptions of the flexible study form*. Since the teachers work in very similar ways we make no distinction of which student has which teacher.

4.3.1 Student views on language learning

To begin with, what all participants express when asked what is important to learn and why they want to learn English is that they want to be able to *speak* English. This is the most prominent English language competence that they want to learn. The level of their desired proficiency ranges from being able to make themselves understood when traveling to another country to speaking the language fluently and adjusted to anybody. Anna added the fact that you need English to be able to

manage some higher education courses, implying reading and understanding skills. Learning new words was also a recurring feature.

To continue, the students' beliefs regarding how to learn English vary. However, they all appreciate the fact that English is being spoken a lot in the workshop. Susanne feels that most of her learning takes place in the actual workshop in the discussions with the teacher and when the teacher corrects her. David also feels that he learns when discussing texts rather than when just reading them. Three of the students find the CD that comes with the textbook helpful to their learning. Jenny said "the words you do not understand you can click on and get them translated." She feels this helps her not to get stuck when reading the texts. David said that listening while he reads makes it easier for him to understand everything. He added that it was harder the first time he started taking the course because there was no CD that time.

Furthermore, Jenny said that she had expected lectures when she started and found that initially she missed not getting any. She compared her English studies to her Spanish studies and found it much easier with Spanish because there were lectures. Carl did not miss lectures but group discussions. He said: "With the flexible study form you lose the possibility of having group discussions. Maybe you could, but it would be much more difficult […] since there are so few of us there at the same time." Jenny also felt that more group discussions would be fun. According to the students most of the communication takes place between the teacher and one student at a time, usually in discussions on the texts the student has worked with. However, they add that students can invite themselves or be invited by the teacher to join a discussion. What they all feel is that you get to talk a lot, whether you want to or not. You cannot hide when there are only three or four people in the room. Susanne is glad that there is no discussion forum on the Internet. Another course she has taken had that and she did not like it because she is not so apt with computers and does not want to discuss things at home as well as in school.

4.3.2 Student perceptions of the flexible study form

First of all, the students are generally very positive about the workshop and feel that the study form is working well for them. Being able to choose when to study and not having to come to school more than once per week are two of the things

the students most appreciate about the study form. Part of what is good about the workshop David said is "you get to decide when to study" and Carl said "that I only have to come once a week." Part of choosing when to study is what day of the week and what time of the day to come to school and part of it is knowing you can work at your own *pace*. Being given more time if you need it is nice to know because you do not have to feel afraid that you are not going to make it and it also means there is less pressure, Jenny and Susanne said. Some of the participants have found regular times to study while others try to fit in their studies with their jobs, children and other spare-time activities. This also means, to some of the participants, that at times studying takes a lower priority to other things that come up. Carl and Susanne who have both been studying for a while and also do not work besides school have found regular study times. Anna, however, said her family comes first and David said: "Well, if something else comes up you may easily not bother about studying." Doing a full-time job at the same time can be hard, some of them think, since about ten hours per week is what the students understand to be the amount of time required for studies. Both Jenny and David think that they would not be able to study properly if they worked more than they do now. Anna, who does work full-time, says she has grown accustomed to having every second of her spare time devoted to studying.

Moving on, there is a fundamental agreement among the students that workshop studies involve a lot of responsibility on behalf of the student. This responsibility has to do with the fact that there is a lot of work involved when you study in the workshop, most of which is carried out at home. The interviewees think that many people believe that it is easier to study in the workshop than in a classroom course, but they disagree. Susanne expressed that "everybody thinks it is easier to study in the workshop, but it really is not […] you have to trust yourself more to do this" and Anna said she felt nauseous the first couple of weeks because she had not anticipated the heavy workload. David found one of the negative things about the workshop to be the fact that you have to do everything yourself, although he also said that he thinks that this probably means you learn more. Regarding taking or not taking responsibility for your own work Anna pointed out that "being an adult now, you will have to bite the dust later," that is, you have to pay the price if you postpone the work you need to do. With the heavy workload and responsibility for planning your own time they all say that it is important to be self disciplined. However, Carl believes you will learn to

be disciplined simply because you have to or you will be kicked out of the course. What also happens is, like Jenny and Susanne have experienced that you will end up trying to do all your work the night before school. Susanne also said "you have to be disciplined, you can not just look and say oh, the floor is dirty, have to clean it". The key with the workshop, which many of the students say, is that if you have not done anything you may as well not bother going to school, since the work in the workshop mostly revolves around what you have done at home.

The basic perception the students have of their work is that they follow the study guide, although not necessarily the time line in it. They read the texts, do the grammar and other exercises as well as learn new words. A lot of written production is to be handed in every week. They may then be able to notice what areas they have problems with or the teacher tells them what they need to practice more and what they can do less of or not have to do at all. Susanne feels that what she does is completely adjusted to her needs and nobody else's. Carl says he does not know what everybody else does and therefore does not know whether what he does is adapted to his needs. Although, when he took English A the teacher told Carl that he could skip the grammar and only read one book instead of two because that would be enough for him. The students say that the choice of what books and articles to read is free. The textbook offers some options to choose from when it comes to their written production, so Anna and Jenny expressed that their writing is pretty free although not completely.

Finally, when it comes to the social aspects of studying, the participants think that the small groups mean that the teacher gets to know them well and that they get the teacher's full attention when they are there. Susanne feels safe in the small group and appreciates it particularly because she has a phobia for giving oral presentations in large groups. Some of the interviewees think that you probably should not be a person who needs a lot of people around you if you are going to study in the workshop. They express that you probably need to be independent and content to work on your own. Susanne, for example, said that "a lot of people need to be surrounded by a class and be helped by them but that is not me, I can come here and then I go home and mind my own business." Along similar lines, Anna feels that she has enough in her life not to need more people around her. The time with the teacher is highly valued, though, and for the most part the students are very pleased with their teacher. Jenny expressed that "there are human beings here and not just teachers, that is, they understand," and Susanne

said that "you can sit and talk to the teacher, it is not like 'your time is up', you can stay and talk as long as you have questions." David, however, who chose to meet the teacher alone, thinks that "[m]aybe it would have been good to have had a little more time with the teacher."

4.4 Analysis of student interviews

In the students' responses we found certain recurring themes relating to our question on how they perceive flexible learning regarding their study of English. Some of these themes are therefore interlinked and the analysis is divided into two main parts, the first one we have called *flexibility and responsibility* and the second *communicative ability and social aspects*.

4.4.1 Flexibility and responsibility

The students all experienced time flexibility as a very positive factor in their studies. It is also a factor that is very prominent in the description of what flexible learning is and may be the biggest difference compared to other forms of education they have experienced. The mere opportunity to be in control of the planning of their own time was highly estimated in itself, which is in line with Olsson's findings about time factors (2005 p 71). This also means that students are able to work at their own pace, which according to the 2004 Quality Report of the school is one of the major reasons why students choose the study form. The time flexibility also entailed practical effects, such as the students being able to work and take care of their family while studying. To some of the students this factor was a prerequisite for choosing the study form, which corresponds to the objectives of flexible learning that concern reaching and enabling more people to study and also makes life-long learning possible. Flexibility concerning the start and end of every individual's course is also part of time flexibility. Although David was the only participant who did not start when regular terms start, two of the students expressed that knowing you can take some extra time to finish if you need to, is comforting to know. Erasing terms as they have usually been, thus seems positive to some students and is an advantage of flexible learning from a student perspective.

The drawback with planning their own time, which all participants expressed, is the fact that factors in the home environment as well as other commitments may be distracting. Whether it was work, children, dirty floors or other activities that distracted them, the participants all felt that it was very important to be disciplined to be successful in their studies. Östlund's study of students in distance education found domestic factors and work to be significant obstacles to studying (2005). However, like Carl pointed out, it is possible that you learn to be disciplined after a while, when you realize you have to be. Susanne and Jenny, the students confessing to initially ending up doing all their work the evening before school, can be seen as living proof of students learning to take such responsibility. The important feature that steps in is that the learners have to start taking on the responsibility for their own learning. As Anna said, since they are adults they are themselves responsible for doing what needs to be done. This ties in with the concept of learner autonomy, particularly with being able to take the steps necessary to achieve the objectives of your learning that Tornberg says is part of the learner autonomy concept (2000 p 165). The first step ought to be that you actually do study. The students did feel that they have to take a lot of responsibility for their studies, although for most of them it was perceived as positive rather than as a burden. In addition, all students, and Carl in particular because he lived outside the town, found it very convenient to only have to come to school once a week.

Being able to choose when and where to study is a way of individualizing in the broader sense, according to Thelin and Scherp (2004 p 26). Individualization in the pedagogical sense involves, for example, choosing materials to fit the individual students. This feature was not one that the students emphasized when describing what they appreciate about the study form. Although they said that the teacher tells them what they need to work more on and they are free to choose what novels and articles to read, the students mostly felt that they follow the study guide and do all the exercises. However, Susanne in particular was positive about the fact that she feels that her work is adjusted to her needs and problem areas. The fact that Carl only had to read one novel can be seen as a recognition or validation of his reading skills, and as a way of individualizing. Flexibility and individualization also have a lot to do with adjusting education for example to suit different learner styles. Three of the students were very happy about the CD that comes with the textbook and felt that it helped them in their studies. The use of a

CD can be seen as a way of adjusting or providing flexibility of learning approaches to fit more learners' learner styles.

4.4.2 Communicative ability and social aspects

The students all wanted some form of communicative ability, especially being able to make themselves understood in spoken English. They were very positive towards the workshop in the sense that they felt that a lot of English was spoken there. Since there were so few students present at a time they felt they were given a lot of opportunities to speak, which is in agreement with their goals of learning English. Most of this communication was between the teacher and one learner at a time and not much interaction between students took place. This was not a concern to most of the participants, speaking with the teacher seems to be sufficient to them. Östlund found that distance education students felt that interaction was important to them (2005). However, our results are more in line with Svedjeholm's findings that students think that flexibility is more important than interaction and that a good dialogue with and support from the teacher to some extent makes up for other interaction (2004 pp 13-14).

Having so little time at school, the participants felt that you have to be content to work a lot on your own to study in the workshop. Most of them had busy lives outside of school and did not express a great need for social activities in school. Susanne preferred the small group due to her phobia for oral presentations. All the students also expressed that they get full attention from the teacher and that the teacher gets to know them well. These findings are in line with what Eriksson says about distance actually bringing about closeness (2004 p 38). Svedjeholm's article also shows that social time, or the lack thereof, does not appear to be a major reason why students drop out of distance courses (2004 p 6).

To sum up, we found that the students' perceptions of the workshop is that they are generally satisfied with it. The flexibility of time, pace and place are highly estimated as well as the attention and communication with the teacher. This is more valued than the social aspects of having group activities. The students also express that one must be prepared for a lot of independent work, since little time is spent in the workshop. There is a heavy workload which entails a great amount of responsibility on behalf of the student, which also means that sometimes other commitments are prioritized. Some individualization of their

work takes place, though most of the students do not perceive it as a prominent feature of the study form.

4.5 Results of teacher interviews

The results of the teacher interviews with Eva and Thomas, who were presented in the methodology chapter, are accounted for below. Since we are investigating perceptions we present the two interviews together rather than separately. We use the basic categories also found in our guiding questions, namely *teacher views on language learning, teacher perspectives on the flexible study from* and lastly *teacher views on how students' perceive the flexible study form.*

4.5.1 Teacher views on language learning

The teachers feel that the English courses both aim at making the students able to read and understand written texts, and that this is needed for them to be prepared for higher education. They also need to be able to reflect on and discuss texts they have read and be able to take part in conversations as well as understand the dialogue in for example films.

In order to reach the goals of the course what is needed is practice, says Thomas. Eva says that exposure to the target language is important and that the learner also needs to be interested and have the will to learn in order to succeed. Reading is also very important followed by writing and talking about what has been read.

Thomas thinks the flexible study form corresponds to his view of language learning. He says that though all education should not be given in the flexible form, it serves an important purpose. He believes however, that the lack of opportunities to meet is a shortcoming and that there is a danger in making all education individualized, since a lot is lost by not having the social environment. He adds that it is probably possible to arrange more opportunities to meet in the flexible study form, than is being done today. Eva does not feel that the flexible study form completely corresponds to her view of language learning, claiming that there is not enough time to repeatedly practice for example grammatical features and conversation. Thus, students need to have a rather good basic

knowledge of English to do the flexible English courses, she says. Like Thomas she also expresses that it would be preferable and more fun for the students if they could form groups where the students could discuss and learn together.

4.5.2 Teacher perspectives on the flexible study form

When describing how they work with the study workshops, Eva explains that she initially makes sure she knows what students are coming, and prepare material, such as exercises or tests for them to work with. She feels that it takes more of a mental preparation than a practical one and therefore not so much time is used before meeting the student. The workload is heavier afterwards, though, since the students are very active and produce a lot of written work to mark. Eva thinks it is important that the students are the active ones in the workshop, rather than the teacher. She also believes that teachers who teach flexible courses need to be experienced to be able to explain any grammatical or other language feature that might arise, "off the cuff."

Thomas has organized his workshop so that each student receives about 20 minutes a week with him at a specific time and when they meet they speak English and often discuss the texts they have read and go through the grammar linked to that text. In preparation he needs to make sure that he knows where the students are at and what they have done. They use a textbook and the students are generally given homework from one week to the next. He finds his workload clearly heavier than in his regular courses since he needs to prepare for meeting every single student rather than using the same plan for all. He says: "Every student is truly a class of their own." In that regard the study workshop is probably less cost effective, according to Thomas, since each student requires a lot of teacher time.

Both teachers point out that students need to be very active in the workshop and that there is no point in coming unless they have done some work. The teacher thus has more control over what each individual has done from one week to the next. In addition, the students are supposed to take on more responsibility over their learning in the workshop compared to regular courses.

They also agree on the fact that the flexible study form allows for individualization. Thomas says: "The workshop makes it possible to adjust teaching to the level the student really is at and not attempt to make one program

fit all." This means that when they realize that a student needs something particular it can be arranged. Thomas exemplifies by saying that some students do not do well with grammar at all, and knowing that more practice and grammar exercises are useless, he can move on to find new ways of reaching the same result. Eva talks about validating students and says that there are students who definitely can finish the course more quickly which makes the flexible form a way of meeting the needs of very competent and efficient learners.

Eva says that it is very difficult to organize groups of students who are doing the same thing, partly because there are so many possible times for students to come. She thinks it is a shame since it would be better if they could work together rather than individually. Eva thinks it is very beneficial for the students when there are discussions and also when one student asks questions the others could learn from it as well. This way of learning from other students, learning together, is to some extent lost in the workshop. She also points to what a nice learning experience it can be to have a lecture together with other students as a group. She says that "There is always the balance between on the one hand group dynamics, groups and the social aspects and on the other hand the individual needs." Thomas also says that the social aspect of learning gives way for the individual needs and says that there are possibilities to form groups though the workshop would then lose some of its focus on the individual.

Moreover, Eva feels that the focus on the individual is a reflection of society and says that the school has to adjust to the demands of their customers. The school needs to be accessible to as many students as they can, which is why different study forms are offered, Thomas says.

Both teachers enjoy working with the flexible study form, since it allows the teacher to get to know the students much better than they otherwise would, especially since they have rather few students. Thomas expresses that he specifically enjoys not always being the center of attention and the "driving element" in the classroom without whom nothing would happen. He also said that he feels that both the learner and the teacher are "seen" in the workshop.

4.5.3 Teacher views on how students perceive the flexible study form

The teachers believe that the students think the workshop works well, though they both emphasize that certain characteristics on the part of the learner are needed in order to succeed.

First of all, they think that students need to have a rather good basic knowledge of English and need to be able to speak quite well beforehand, since there is little time for practicing conversation in the workshops, according to Eva. Thomas on the other hand says that students in regular courses do not speak much in a lesson generally. In the workshop, even though they do not meet more than once a week, they get 20 minutes of intensive oral practice in discussions with him. They also need to be disciplined as well as motivated, though some motivation can be attained in the process. The teacher has a role in motivating students to learn, says Thomas.

When giving examples of students who benefit from the workshop they point to very specific groups of learners such as students who dislike speaking in front of a class, students who have an aversion towards grammar, students who never felt comfortable in a regular class, and those who disliked group work in upper-secondary school. The really capable students who were bored throughout upper-secondary school can also enjoy the workshop since they can do their work at their own pace. If they are students who enjoy working on their own and who do not get too frustrated when they encounter difficulties the flexible study form can be suitable. Thus Eva emphasizes that "it fits some students like a glove." They both express that the flexible study form is not suitable for students who are poor learners.

Thomas says that students often have the wrong idea about what it means to study in the workshop. They assume that since they do not have to spend a lot of time at school it must be easy, when in reality it is not. Eva says that very few students fail the courses, though the students who do not feel that they can succeed probably drop out. A lot of the students who do not complete the courses drop out before even meeting their regular teacher which she feels is frustrating.

4.6 Analysis of teacher interviews

In the interview data there are a few recurring themes that deal with interesting aspects of flexible learning in practice, related to our research question of how teachers perceive flexible learning with regards to students' study and learning of English. Both teachers repeatedly mention the *focus on the individual* in the flexible study form and individualization in general. There is also a substantial amount of data concerning *communication and interaction in the workshops*. We analyze these two themes separately and then in connection to each other since the teachers expressed that they are difficult to combine.

4.6.1 Focus on the individual learner

As mentioned above, one theme in the teacher interviews is the focus on the individual learner. Thomas said that the workshop makes it possible "[t]o adjust teaching to the level the student really is at and not attempt to make one program fit all." This is one of several examples in the interviews of focus on the individual, or more specifically of individualization in the flexible study form. Thomas also expressed that it is important to adjust to the students needs since all students do not experience the same difficulties, even though that is often pretended to be the case in a regular class. Hallengren expresses that accommodating the needs of adult learners is exactly what flexible learning aims at doing, though she does not explain what needs she is referring to (2004 p 303). Thelin and Scherp make a distinction between the pedagogical and the more practical needs of the students and argue that flexible learning meets the practical rather than the pedagogical needs of learners (2004 p 26). The teacher interviews mainly provide examples of individualization regarding what to work with and at what pace, rather than the more practical aspects of allowing students to choose when and where to study. Regarding pace, Eva said that there are students who definitely can do the course more quickly, which makes the flexible form a way of meeting the needs of very competent and efficient learners. What she expressed also has to do with validating students, in other words, acknowledging what the student already knows and moving on from there (Andersson 2004 pp 91-95). Along the same lines, Thomas said that knowing that a student does not do well with grammar, he tries to find other means of reaching the same results. This

shows that Thomas perceives that he is able to differentiate in the flexible study form.

Moreover, the learner focus entails keeping track of students' performances as well. The teachers said that they have more control over what each individual has done from one week to the next. They underlined the fact that they get to know the students well in the workshop, which is in line with what the students also expressed. The teachers also agreed on that the students really are seen in a different way in the workshop than in a regular class, which shows that the teachers perceive that there are substantial advantages with the workshop courses.

Thomas thinks that there is a correspondence between his view of how languages are learned and the study form. Thus the teachers believe that the workshop works well for students, though some characteristics are needed, on the part of the learner, in order to succeed. Eva said that for some students the study form "fits like a glove," for example for those who have a good basic knowledge of English and enjoy working on their own. The students need to be disciplined, or at least somewhat motivated and not generally too poor language learners, which is in line with the concern Gabrielsson raises regarding poor learners being disadvantaged by the flexible study form (2004 p 34). The need for students taking flexible courses to be disciplined is also raised in the official report *Flexibel utbildning på distans,* referring to the fact that the demands on learners make flexible courses more suited for adults than young learners (SOU 1998:84 p 150). The need to be disciplined was also repeatedly raised by the students.

Hence, the interviews showed that the workshop facilitates individualization, that it suits some students particularly well, and that the teachers perceive that the study form has a clear learner focus.

4.6.2 Communication and interaction in the workshops

As accounted for in chapter 2, communication has been given a superordinate role in language teaching today (Malmberg 2001 p 17). Eva said that a shortcoming of the flexible form is the loss of the group dynamics found in regular classes, and also said that "It would be preferable and more fun for the students if they could form groups where the students could discuss and learn together." She also stressed what a nice learning experience it can be to have common lectures. This resonates a Vygotskyan view on learning pointing out the importance of social

interaction (Säljö 2000 p 65). Eva also expressed that it is difficult to form groups of students who are doing the same thing. In line with what Eva said, Thelin and Scherp argue that the flexible study form makes it considerably harder to facilitate social interaction (2004 p 34).

Thomas sees a danger in having only individual studies since he believes that social aspects are important. According to Gabrielsson there is a risk of the social objectives of the curriculum being set aside in the flexible study form (2004 p 34).

The teachers, as well as research on flexible learning, find that a shortcoming of flexible learning is that there are fewer opportunities for students to meet, interact and communicate with each other. In that regard there is a discernable discrepancy between the sociocultural teaching ideals and the flexible study form (Svedjeholm 2004 p 1). Consequently, the flexible study form can be said to reflect a view of learning more in line with Piaget and the cognitivists rather than the Vygotskyan sociocultural approach, since Piaget focuses on the individual and the inner process of learning whilst Vygotsky promotes social interaction (Lightbown and Spada 1999 p 23).

However, interaction does not necessarily need to take place between peers but there is also interaction between teacher and student and in the workshop they are, from time to time, able to form small groups and have discussions. Despite the fact that there are fewer opportunities for social interaction in the workshop, they meet and the students get to practice speaking, according to Thomas. The time each student generally gets to practice speaking in a regular class is very limited, so though the student only has a short time with the teacher in the workshop, those approximately 20 minutes give the student intensive speaking practice. This indicates that the workshop does not necessarily provide the students with less oral practice despite the fact that students spend such a short period of time at school. According to Svedjeholm, a good dialogue with the teacher can to some extent make up for interacting with peers (2004 p 12).

Thus, the teachers perceive the fact that it is harder to facilitate interaction in the workshops as a drawback. However, Thomas expressed that the students are able to practice a great deal of speaking with their teacher, which according to Svedjeholm can to some extent make up for peer interaction.

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4.6.3 The clash between individualization and social interaction

What is prevalent in the teacher interviews is the problem of combining the focus on the individual and facilitating interaction. Eva expresses that "there is on the one hand group dynamics, groups and the social aspects and on the other hand the individual needs." This suggests that the two are difficult to combine, either the individual preferences and needs are accommodated, or they can facilitate interaction by forming groups at the cost of flexibility. Thomas, who pointed out that the lack of opportunities to meet is a shortcoming, suggested that more group activities could be arranged within the flexible form, however, it would then be at the cost of the individual needs. Though the teachers did not explicitly use the word clash, they suggest that there is an underlying conflict between individualization and interaction.

Svedjeholm writes that the physical meeting is viewed as a prerequisite for learning which implies that distance education cannot provide a sufficient learning environment. According to her, this is the main objection against the increase in distance education today. Though this sociocultural view of learning is prominent, she argues that interaction does not play such a key role and that adult learners see flexibility as relatively more important (2004 pp 13-14). It needs to be said, however, that the workshop provides students with the opportunity to see the teacher face-to-face and meet some fellow students, which means that they are not completely comparable to students taking distance courses.

The teachers emphasized the advantages of the students being seen and that students and teachers get to know each other much better in the workshop than in a regular class. This view is also reflected in the interviews when the advantages of being able to individualize are stressed and the lack of interaction is seen as a shortcoming, but they do not appear to really perceive it to be a great obstacle for learning English, which is in line with what Svedjeholm concludes (2004 p 13-14). They both expressed that for some students the workshop is a good study form for learning English.

Setting aside the difficulties of managing to connect on the one hand the individual's needs and on the other hand group dynamics and social interaction, the teachers enjoy and believe the flexible study form is a good complement to regular classroom education and point out that some students in particular benefit from this alternative to regular courses.

5 Discussion and conclusions

In this final part of our dissertation we discuss the results of our study and account for what conclusions we can draw from it, thereby answering the research questions posed. The focus of the discussion revolves around the main themes of the student and teacher analyses, as well as around our methodological choices and the sources we have used.

5.1 Discussion

To begin with, aiming at gaining an understanding of student and teacher perceptions of one study form we feel that the choice of doing a case study was appropriate. To gain insights on participant perspectives interviewing was a good method. However, the art of interviewing is not an easy one to master. In retrospect there is always one more question you could have asked. Still, doing the interviews together we were able to fill in some gaps and discuss the responses, which was also helpful when interpreting the interviews. The observations were very useful in giving us a sense of the atmosphere and of how work is carried out in the workshop. In addition, the observations gave us an idea of what to include in our guiding questions.

The informants we selected may not be completely representative of the workshops we studied. Though a significant amount of students in adult education drop out, these students are still taking the courses, which could indicate that they are not entirely unhappy with the study form. On the other hand our goal was not to find out why some students do not like the workshop and so our informants' perceptions are of interest and are relevant to create an understanding of how students in the workshops perceive flexible learning of English. It is possible that a greater number of interviewees would have provided a wider range of perceptions.

Although a vast amount of research on flexible learning has been done, the researchers often do not differentiate between distance education and the semi-

distance form that the workshop represents. Therefore some of the research we refer to concern flexible education in all its forms rather than the workshop form specifically. A great deal of the research we have referred to comes from the public authority CFL, which sets out to promote flexible learning. Therefore, they may not necessarily provide a nuanced view on flexible learning.

Moving on to discuss our results, we found that the students were generally content with studying in the workshop, as were the teachers working with it. This general satisfaction should perhaps not have surprised us, but we must admit that it did. In our view, when learning languages it is particularly important to *use* the target language, thus we had anticipated that the students would express that they missed having peers to communicate and interact with. Still, we found that they felt that they received enough attention from the teacher, including oral communication, and that they did not miss the social aspects of being part of a group. It was a surprise to us in itself that they experienced that there was a lot of communication, since so little time is spent in the actual workshop. Yet, since the teachers are adamant about speaking English in the workshop the students were satisfied in this regard. Though the course plan and current theory on language learning promote communication and interaction, the students, thus, appear to be happy with the way the workshop works for them and value practical flexibility rather than interaction and social aspects. The teachers acknowledge the lack of interaction as a shortcoming but they feel that there are great advantages with being able to focus on the individual and accommodate individual needs. If they feel that they are happy without meeting each other much is then interaction that important in facilitating learning? Who but the students who experience the study form can judge whether this is a good way of learning? On the other hand, can students really be expected to know how well they learn in a particular study form or should pedagogical aspects of learning play a greater role in how to organize education? We wonder if learners generally have a good grasp of how they learn the most and what is needed for them to learn well? This would be interesting to look into.

Flexible study forms are becoming increasingly widespread. We as teachers are therefore likely to come across it in one form or another in the future. We have studied one such form and found that there are new challenges for both learners and teachers. Though we might not encounter the exact same study form our research provides some insights on what flexible learning can entail. For that

reason we feel that our study is relevant for our future profession. Since the students so clearly expressed the importance of the teacher rather than on having peers, it would be interesting to investigate if and how flexible study forms affect teacher-student relationships which perhaps extends to the students' perceptions of the school system.

5.2 Conclusions

Setting out to investigate how students and teachers perceive the flexible study form with regards to the students' study of English, we arrived at the following conclusions.

To begin with, we were somewhat surprised to find how generally satisfied the students were with the flexible study form and how few complaints they voiced. Although we had anticipated them to express a greater need for improvements of the study form, they hardly did. The students are particularly content with being in control of planning their own time, which involves studying at their own pace and deciding when and where to do so. Being disciplined and taking responsibility for the heavy workload appears to be the most difficult part of studying in the workshops. We also found that the students do not miss the social aspects of having a class, since most of them have busy lives outside of school. The teacher instead plays an important role and the students experience that they get a lot of time to practice speaking and interact with their teacher. Our findings are not groundbreaking but are in line with what prior research has shown regarding what students in flexible and distance education value.

Moreover, we found that the teachers above all perceive the flexible study form to be a good complement to regular courses, since some students really benefit from it. Those who do not have the necessary basic knowledge, motivation and discipline needed or are poor learners are less suited for the flexible study form. What we feel stands out in our findings is the fact that the workshop study form inevitably entails a clash between the possibilities of focusing on the individual and facilitating interaction through group activities. The teachers expressed that the lack of interaction is a shortcoming, however, much of the flexibility and focus on the individual would be lost if more group activities were

arranged. Being able to individualize and getting to know each student is according to the teachers a great advantage of the flexible study form.

Thus, our final conclusion is that the students' and teachers' perceptions of the flexible study form with regard to the study of English are predominantly positive.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Information to interviewees

Vi heter Mathilda Bengtsson och Emma Rehn och är två studenter som går sista terminen på Lärarhögskolan i Malmö. Vårt huvudämne är engelska och vi har valt att skriva vårt examensarbete om studieverkstaden i engelska A och B på Komvux. Vi är nyfikna på att undersöka hur lärare och studenter uppfattar att studieverkstaden fungerar, eftersom det är en relativt ny studieform. För att ta reda på detta behöver vi intervjua lärare och studenter som går i studieverkstaden.

Intervjuerna kommer att vara utformade som samtal och hållas under avslappnade former. *De kommer att vara max en timme långa och kommer att spelas in på band* för att vi ska kunna få med så mycket information som möjligt. I examensarbetet kommer inga namn på medverkande att nämnas. All information kommer att behandlas konfidentiellt.

Vi tror att Du har viktig information att bidra med och uppskattar Din medverkan!
Vid intervjutillfället bjuds det på kaffe och bulle som tack för hjälpen. Har du några frågor om examensarbetet eller intervjun kan Du kontakta oss via e-mail:

Mathilda Bengtsson   Emma Rehn
LL010691@stud.mah.se   LL011188@stud.mah.se

Appendix 2: Guiding questions for students

Bakgrundsfrågor
- **Berätta lite om dig själv.**

Ålder, kön, utbildning, tidigare erfarenhet av studieverkstad/distansutbildning, annat. Hur kom det sig att du valde att läsa engelska i studieverkstaden?

Studentens syn på språkinlärning

- **Vilka är dina mål med att lära dig engelska? Vad vill du lära dig?**

Motivation.

- **Hur tror du att du lär dig engelska bäst (i skolform)? Ge exempel på sätt att arbeta som du tycker du lär dig bra på.**

Learner beliefs and preferences, interaction, communication

Studentens syn på sin situation

- **Beskriv hur du arbetar med engelskan nu, i och utanför studieverkstaden.**

Berätta hur en typisk arbetsvecka ser ut för dig med engelskan. Praktiskt.

- **Hur tycker du att det fungerar att arbeta med studieverkstad?**

Bra/mindre bra? Förändra/förbättra? Tidigare erfarenheter? Individanpassad?

Eget ansvar? (learner autonomy, individualization)

- **Skulle du rekommendera andra att läsa i studieverkstaden? I så fall vem och av vilken anledning?**

Avrundning
- **Övrigt att tillägga?**

Summera, tacka för medverkan.

Appendix 3: Guiding questions for teachers

Bakgrundsfrågor
- **Berätta lite om dig själv.**

Ålder, kön, utbildning, arbetslivserfarenhet, erfarenhet av och utbildning i flexibelt lärande, på Komvux.

Lärarens uppfattning om SIN situation
- **Beskriv en dag med studieverkstaden för dig.**

För- och efterarbete, samt lektion.

- **Jämför studieverkstaden med din övriga undervisning.**

Likheter och skillnader?

- **Hur tycker du att det fungerar för dig att arbeta på detta vis?**

Fördelar och nackdelar?

Lärarens uppfattning om ELEVENS situation
- **Hur tycker du att det fungerar för eleverna att arbeta med studieverkstaden?**

Inlärning, resultatmässigt

- **Vad är din uppfattning om vad eleverna tycker om arbetssättet?**

Tänkbara orsaker.

- **Vilka elever tror du att studieverkstaden passar för? Varför?**
- **Tycker du att flexibla kurser ger större möjligheter till individualisering?**

Lärarens syn på kunskap och språkinlärning

- **Vad är målet med att lära sig engelska?**

Vad ska man ha sin kunskap till, vad är viktigt att kunna?
- **Hur tycker du man lär sig språk?**
Hur når man målen? Vilka är de viktigaste komponenterna?

- **Hur stämmer flexibelt lärande överens med din syn på språkinlärning?**

Avrundning
Övrigt att tillägga? Summera och tacka för medverkan.